

# The Style Invitational

## THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

### Week 702: Unreal Facts



BY BOB STAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

**A Big Gulp cup can hold 27 European swallows.**

**Pillow suffocation is a legal execution method in seven states.**

**Richard Nixon held his last breath for 12 years 301 days.**

**H**eavily Ink-Stained Loser Kevin Dopart, who submits several dozen entries to us each week, all sorted into tidy little categories, suggested this twist on the "Real Facts" included under the caps of Snapple bottles (e.g., "a bee has five eyes"): **Come up with a comically false... well, let's call it a fictoid**, as in Kevin's examples above. They don't have to fit on a bottle cap, but don't write a whole story.

Winner gets the Inker, the official Style Invitational trophy. First runner-up receives the amazing belt pictured at right, sent to us from New Delhi by Truly Cosmopolitan Loser Robin Diallo. The writing on the belt seems to be in secret code, but if you look long enough, you realize that someone — the proverbial chimp at a typewriter, perhaps? — was attempting to write the titles of various Rolling Stones songs. Hence "Eave You Seen Tour Nd Ther!Bady! Standing in the Sfadgwi."

**Other runners-up** win a coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt, Honorable Mentions (or whatever they're called that week) get one of the lusted-after Style Invitational Magnets. One prize per entrant per week. Send your entries by e-mail to [losers@washpost.com](mailto:losers@washpost.com) or by fax to 202-334-4312. Deadline is Monday, Feb. 26. Put "Week 702" in the subject line of your e-mail, or it risks being ignored as spam. Include your name, postal address and phone number with your entry. Contests are judged on the basis of humor and originality. All entries become the property of The Washington Post. Entries may be edited for taste or content. Results will be published March 18. No purchase required for entry. Employees of The Washington Post, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. This week's Honorable Mentions name is by Bonnie Hughes of Reston. The revised title for next week's contest is by Tom Witte.

## REPORT FROM WEEK 698

In which we sought questions that might (but even we hope would not) be asked by either the interviewer or the applicant during a job interview. No doubt, in a year or two someone with too much time on his hands will e-mail you a list of "actual questions asked during job interviews, compiled by human resources professionals." It will be the list below, minus the names.

**5 Applicant:** Would I be working within 90 feet of any school? (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)

**3 Interviewer:** If my next question is "Do you plan to steal from this company?" would your answer to that question be the same as your answer to this one? (Elden Carnahan, Laurel)

**4 Applicant:** Can I use you as a reference? (Jay Shuck, Minneapolis)

**2 The winner of the pink plastic pig crumb-vac that we thought was a fan:** Applicant: These rules against sexual harassment in the office — do they also apply to the parking lot? (Barry Koch, Catlett, Va.)



## AND THE WINNER OF THE INKER

Applicant: Say, those girls in the photos on your desk, are they seeing anyone, well not the fat one, but those other two? (Russell Beland, Springfield)

## SHORTLISTED

### Questions by the interviewer:

Assuming we're not all mowed down by the disgruntled psycho you're being hired to replace, where do you see yourself in 20 years? (Brendan Beary, Great Mills)

If you could rid the world of any ethnic minority, which one would you get rid of, and why? (Stephen Dudzik, Olney)

"Before we proceed further, you should know that we allow three — and only three — inter-cubicle visits per day. I'm guessing that you're enough of a nebbish to accept that?" (Mae Scanlan, Washington)

Sell me this pocket lint! (Stephen Dudzik)

Prove the Mordell-Weil theorem states for any abelian variety A over a number field K. Nah, I'm kidding. Who's your favorite serial killer? (Ezra Deutsch-Feldman, Chicago)

So, with my last assistant, I'm, like, do it. And he's, like, uch. And I'm, like, what? And he's, like, no way. Now I'm, like, I need this done. And he's, like, I'm outta here. So: Are you like that, too? (Dina Feivelson, New York)

Here's a picture of my mother — do you find her attractive? (Tom Witte, Montgomery Village)

So where do you see yourself five incarnations from now? — *Outsource2India.com, Bangalore, India* (Mary Ann Henningsen, Hayward, Calif.)

Even though drug testing isn't part of our hiring process, could you pee in this cup anyway, just for me? (Brendan Beary)

Is there anything even remotely funny about Dilbert's skewering of middle management? (Stephen Dudzik)

We respect all faiths and creeds, of course. But to take a hypothetical situation — let's say you were caught on the 20th floor as a fire raged. What would be the name of the deity you'd implore for help? (John Shea, Lansdowne, Pa.)

Are you trying to relax by imagining me naked? (Marty McCullen, Gettysburg, Pa.)

Do you always wear such conservative dresses? (Bob Kopac, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.)

What do you have to say about God for shirking work on the seventh day? (Mel Loftus, Holmen, Wis.)

We're looking for a strong supervisor. Do you spank your children? How about your wife? (Drew Bennett, Alexandria)

Let me ask: Do you cringe naturally, or is that something you've had to work on? (Mae Scanlan)

The last guy could turn his hand 360 degrees around his arm. What talent would you bring to the company? (Creigh Richert, Aldie)

I see that you keep looking at me. May I ask why? (Kevin Dopart, Washington)

What would you wear on casual Saturdays? (Art Grinath, Takoma Park)

What's one good reason why I shouldn't throw your adorable little behind out of here right now? (Phil Battey, Alexandria)

Say, you wouldn't know the difference between a teacup Chihuahua and a Cheez Whiz souffle, would you? (Barbara Turner, Takoma Park)

So, do you remember, in third grade, that game of dodgeball? (Ed Gordon, Hollywood, Fla.)

Rolling Stones lead singer Mick Jagger mumbles, but not as badly as a New Delhi beltmaker would have you believe.



BY JULIA EWAN — THE WASHINGTON POST

### Questions by the applicant:

Man, what a tidy office you have. Who's OCD, you or your secretary? (Bonnie Hughes, Reston)

So will Wal-Mart give me time off from the cash register for my union organizing duties? (Axel Brinck, Montreal)

Are conjugal visits allowed? (Gregory James, Mitchellville)

This whole thing is the employee handbook? Don't you have it on, like, a card? (Dennis Lindsay, Seabrook)

On Casual Fridays, can I wear my footie pajamas? (David Moss, Arlington)

Is your pension plan still operative in event of the Rapture? (Peter Metrinko, Chantilly)

So, how would you like to autograph this photo of yours from MySpace? (Peter Boice, Rockville)

Sheesh, doesn't your dental plan cover mouthwash? (Jon Reiser, Hilton, N.Y.)

You all don't drop everything, put candles on a cupcake and do that whole clapping-and-singing thing around somebody who's said it's his birthday, right? 'Cause I once set a guy on fire like that. I wish I could say it was accidental. (Brian Broadus, Charlottesville)

If I don't take any bathroom breaks, can I leave work early each day? (Bonnie Speary Devore, Gaithersburg)

Is there a minimum period to qualify for severance pay? (Chuck Smith)

Before I sit down, do you mind if I sanitize the chair? (Jane Auerbach, Los Angeles)

Would you like to see some pictures of my cats? (Jack Fiorini, Williamsburg)

Would you mind terribly if I called you Dad? (Jay Shuck)

**Next Week: Our Greatest Hit, or Lexicontortions**

# Scientists See Rising Waters; Diesel Sees Way to Make a Splash

DIESEL, From D1

may not be apparent to anyone but Diesel customers, who've come to expect this sort of thing. In the past, Diesel has run ads advocating the smoking of 145 cigarettes a day (for that "sexy cough") and the drinking of urine to stay young. The company has also attempted to "sponsor" happiness. The irony is of the dark, European sort, best consumed in the company of a Gauloise and knowing laughter.

That global warming is being spoofed by a retailer in the pages of *Vogue* and *Esquire* suggests that the issue is sufficiently widespread and accepted to have reached the irony tipping-point. It also speaks to the saturation of cause marketing, now part of the advertising ploys of everything from rubber gloves to skis to Hummel figurines. It was perhaps only a matter of time before a company like Diesel upended this with a perspective that is either humorous or insulting, depending on how you take it.

We are a nation that shops to save the world. Companies sell not just products but clean consciences. Leaving aside the questions an ethicist might ask (*Is it still charity when one only gives to get?*), consider the pervasiveness of cause marketing in the pages of magazines and the windows of shops. The slogans are so numerous and so specific they verge on the farcical. Post-its: "Stick Up for the Cause." SunChips: "Crunch for the Cure." The pink ribbons of the breast cancer cause have become so commonplace on retail packaging that newspapers have begun to write of a so-called "pinklash."

Which brings us to global warming, an issue that has lately been everywhere, with Al Gore's movie, "An Inconvenient Truth," and the recent dire report released by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Ben & Jerry's ice cream has been pushing a campaign to "Lick Global Warming." (Blech! That sounds gross.)

Amid all these warnings, Diesel wanted to present global warming in a "positive context," says Wilbert Das, the company's creative director. People have become used to learning about global warming in a serious and science-heavy fashion, he says. Spoofing the issue provides a "bigger shock," he says, possibly provoking consumers to think more.

Possibly. The funny thing about the "Global Warming Ready" campaign is that Diesel gets to have it both ways. Its arch attitude represents the triumph of cleverness over meaning, of sarcasm over what's sacred. It speaks to a culture of parody, in which the meta-news is invoked before the actual news is digested. (Or, as in the recent death of Anna Nicole Smith, the jokes begin before the body grows cold.) The photographic landscapes of Diesel's print campaign are surreal, but certain conventions of the fashion world are secure: The models are still svelte, and stylishness still triumphs over all. You can't be too well-



Diesel's new campaign is just one example of its tongue-in-cheek advertising style; it has also run ads advocating the smoking of 145 cigarettes a day (for that "sexy cough").

dressed for the apocalypse.

At the same time, Diesel gets to barnacle itself to the underside of one of the advertising world's biggest trends. The company gets to have a cause, at least for the spring/summer campaign. People who visit Diesel.com are encouraged to purchase a DVD of Gore's movie and are directed to the Web site of an organization dedicated to increasing awareness of global warming. A Q&A on Diesel's site addresses a query about how to treat the environment better "without changing my glamorous lifestyle." (Again, that flip humor. The suggestions include having sex to stay warm instead of turning up the heat.)

Cause marketing's greatest cause is making the sale. With the declining influence of television's 30-second spot and the fragmentation of an audience that now gets its information from three screens (TV, computer and cellphone) instead of one, mar-

eters have to figure out "how to drive a response that's emotional," says Samantha Skey, the executive vice president of strategic marketing at Alloy Media + Marketing.

Skey says her research indicates that young people care about brands doing good, that they look for fairly visible and superficial signs of this goodness (like packaging and advertising) and that they respond to different issues depending on their age. Kids tend to like animal rights because they have pets, Skey says, but they don't get interested in environmental causes till they're in college. Smart marketers pay attention to this stuff when they're choosing what to champion. Skey says she has witnessed cause marketing become more frenetic in the last two years, as companies launch shorter campaigns aimed at capitalizing on whatever disease or tragedy is hot at the moment.

Maybe guilt is the new black. We want to

believe we are not just buying a garment; we are helping find a cure for AIDS. We especially want others to know of our valiant efforts to cure AIDS. A garment that communicates this, such as a Product Red T-shirt purchased at the Gap, fulfills both missions. The proclamation of one's own goodness is viewed by young people as "an extension of the personal brand," says Valerie Seckler, who covers advertising and marketing for Women's Wear Daily.

Once upon a time, Seckler points out, the sort of people "who attached themselves to causes... really drew a line between that kind of activity and going out and greasing the capitalist wheels."

These days, we are Caring™. Is there a tension here? You betcha. Cause marketing soothes the compunctions of a mass-consumption culture at the same time that it contributes to that excess. It allows us to be giving at the same time

that we are selfish. In a recent television ad, actor Ron Livingston tells viewers that if they buy the Red Motorazr cellphone from Sprint, a portion of the proceeds will go toward the problem of AIDS in Africa.

"You also get this very sleek red phone," Livingston says. "Just in case, you know, the saving lives part wasn't enough."

So a campaign that encourages the consumer to do something good, so long as that thing doesn't require changes in a glamorous lifestyle — such a campaign makes a lot of sense. That's what cause marketing has been pushing all along. The fashion comes first. Diesel may bill its campaign as arch, but there's an underlying honesty.

"We are a fashion brand," Das says by phone from Italy. "We want to sell product. We don't do anything more or less."

How crass. Or refreshing. Depending on how you take it.